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5-26-2004

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Recommended Citation
Dallek, Robert, "The Legacy of John F. Kennedy" (2004). *Features.* Paper 90.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/90

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The Legacy of John F. Kennedy

By Robert Dallek

Over the last 40 years, John Kennedy has consistently been rated in the top three when Americans have been asked, "Who's the greatest president in American history?" Shortly before my book came out, *USA Today* did a survey of American opinion and the public voted him second only to Abraham Lincoln. In 1990 his approval rating was 84%.

To historians, this is something of a puzzler because on the face of it he shouldn't be so highly rated. After all, the man served only a thousand days in the White House. His was the sixth shortest presidency in the country's history behind William Henry Harrison, James A. Garfield, and -- in the 20th century -- Warren G. Harding and Gerald Ford. None who have served such a short period of time have matched Kennedy's appeal to the public.

Robert Dallek in Grand Valley State University's DeVos Center

One could point out that not only did he have limited service in the White House -- his domestic record was pretty lousy. Not a single one of his major domestic initiatives was passed in his lifetime: not civil rights, not the $11 billion tax-cut he proposed, not federal aid to elementary, secondary and higher education, not Medicare or Medicaid, not the "war on poverty," which he talked about. None of these came to fruition in his lifetime. The Departments of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development... none of these. So what you had was a presidency with nothing resembling a substantial domestic record.

In foreign policy there were some serious stumbles. The Bay of Pigs operation came so early in this term -- April of 1961 -- and forever thereafter he rued the fact that he agreed to do this. He walked around saying, "How could I have been so stupid?" Historians, so to speak, were also on his case over Vietnam. What we know, of course, when he came to the White House there were some 650 American military advisors in Vietnam. About the time he died, November of 1963, we had about 16,700 losses. Lots of historians are inclined to say Vietnam traces back to Kennedy and they see this as a failing or failed policy. Let's put the blame where it deserves to go -- John Kennedy should be included in those who were criticized. On the face of it, again, one would think that it would undermine, undercut, and even blight his reputation ....

Finally, he was a world-class womanizer. And indeed the one revelation I had -- don't rush out to buy my book over this -- was that he had an affair with a 19 or 20-year old intern. I only had 38 words in the book about this but when *Dateline* interviewed me the week the book was coming out, they ran a story about it. It became the second biggest news story in America that month... 38 words... two lines. *The New York Daily News* called me up and questioned me about, "Who is the intern?"

Again, has his womanizing had an impact on Kennedy's standing? Not in the least. Somehow people don't seem to care. So there are two questions that I think historians have to ask. Why does he continue to enjoy such high standing? And secondly, is it merited? Does he deserve to be remembered as a very important major figure in American presidential history?

My answer would run something like this. First of all, his hold on the public rests in significant part on the fact that he was assassinated -- that he was martyred. But that is by no stretch of the imagination the full story. After all, in 1901 William McKinley, a popular president at the time, had been elected to a second term; he was assassinated and all these years later not many people in America know who he was or remember him. He seems to have faded into that pantheon of late 19th century presidents: all with sideburns and whiskers. No one could distinguish Garfield from Arthur from McKinley from Cleveland; they all seem to run together. So the assassination is important but it's not the whole story.

I think the second very important part of the explanation has to do with television, with the fact that Kennedy is kept alive by TV tapes; he's frozen in our memories at the age of 46. Not many people realize, or quite take in the fact, that if he had lived he would have been 86 years of age this past May 29th. Nobody could picture him or imagine him at the age of 86. They see him as youthful, vital, handsome, witty, charming, and intelligent.

He was the first one to hold live televised press conferences. He could have stumbled and injured the national security and his administration, but understandably he had tremendous confidence in his use of television. The debate with Nixon had been very successful because those that heard the debate on the radio thought that Nixon had won and those who saw it on the television were convinced that Kennedy had won. Kennedy was so photogenic, and some would say Nixon looked like a sinister chipmunk -- the five o'clock shadow and the lack of cool that Kennedy presented.

So there's no question about style -- the public image, the memories of Jackie; the pictures of him with the two children; the memories that people have of John Junior saluting the casket as it went by; the Kennedy dynasty. This was the royal family. This was America's pride -- this young, handsome, enormously attractive, aristocratic family. I think this echoes to this day.

There's also the fact that he was our first ethnic president. Yes he was Catholic but when you look at the voting records -- which I did -- it wasn't only Catholics and Irish Catholics who voted for him. It was Italians, Jews, Poles, French-Canadians, and people of all ethnic stripes who took pride in his gaining the White House.... It wasn't until Kennedy that ethnics felt fully accepted in America's political, economic, and social life. It gave them a sense of acceptance. To this day ethnics still cherish his memory.

Presidential Historian Robert Dallek spoke at the Hauenstein Center in October, 2003, shortly after publishing An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963. *Following are his remarks on JFK's legacy.*